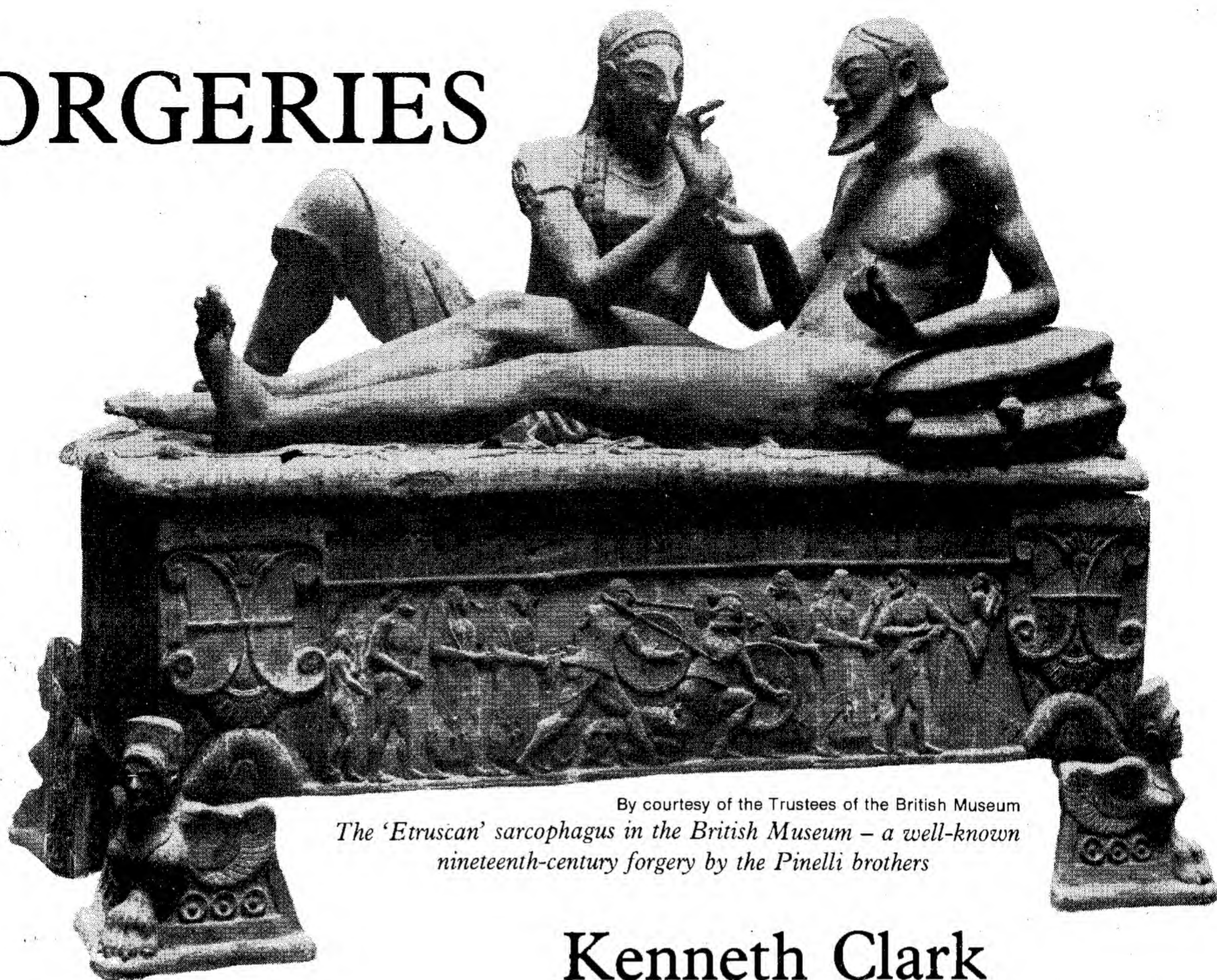


FORGERIES



By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum
The 'Etruscan' sarcophagus in the British Museum – a well-known nineteenth-century forgery by the Pinelli brothers

Kenneth Clark

Much of our evidence for the past comes from paintings and sculpture. But how reliable is this source? Lord Clark examines the history of forgeries in art and discusses the motives of the forgers and the reasons for which what now seem to us obvious forgeries were accepted in their time as authentic. He concludes with a discussion of the ethical problems raised by forgeries.

TO FORGE A CHEQUE, even if one has no great respect for the system of private property, is a questionable operation. It destroys trust, which is unethical by any standard. To forge incriminating documents, like the Dreyfus papers or the Casket letters, used to bring Mary Queen of Scots to the scaffold – incidentally, neither of these forgeries would have deceived a child – is definitely wicked. Here I am going to discuss a far more debatable aspect of forgery: that is to say, works of art made, for whatever reason, considerably later

than the time when they were supposed to have been made.

There are several reasons why the forgery of works of art is such a delicate subject. For one thing, what we should call forgery is often done with conviction and even with approval. And then we are by no means always agreed as to what is and what is not a forgery. If a remarkable work of art has been admired by a generation of amateurs and scholars what useful purpose can be served by proving that it is a forgery? In the Metropolitan Museum of New

York is a fifth-century Greek bronze of a horse, which for many years seemed to me one of the most beautiful things in the whole collection of antiquities. Then some intelligent scholar decided that it was a fake. The mouth was open and the nostrils dilated in a way that never existed in the fifth-century. Worse still, a line down the middle of the forehead showed that it had been sand-cast in moulds – a technique unknown in the fifth-century. The horse was duly consigned to the basement, to the sorrow of many visitors to the Metropolitan. Then another scholar examined it and said that the horse was indeed antique, but was perhaps an attempt by an artist of a later period of Greek art to reproduce the style of the fifth-century. So up it came again, and was exhibited in solitary splendour, surrounded by four walls of photographic documentation.

Another instance has ended more conclusively. When I went to the National Gallery as Director, a beautiful picture by Filippino Lippi was hung in the basement as a fake because a member of the Rothschild family, who was an expert on wood, had said that it was painted on American burrwood. The name of Rothschild was paramount and down it went. It looked all right to me, so I had it X-rayed, and there appeared an underpainting that was unquestionably the work of Filippino; I therefore called in experts from Kew, who said that it was painted on Italian poplar. Even in this period of drastic elimination it is still hung in the quattrocento room of the National Gallery.

In the same room is a portrait of a lady called Constanza de Medici. It is an attractive and popular picture. Personally I have no doubt at all that it is a fake. The cracklure seems to me fabricated, the colour has a tasteful, old-fashioned tea-room look, the face has a Victorian expression. Incidentally, it came from a very bad source, the Florentine dealer Bardini, whose whole collection was full of fakes. I did everything I could to find scientific evidence to support my conviction. She passed every test, as fakes usually do. This leads me to say that, although I believe that 'hunches', or what are called subjective judgements, are by far the best way of detecting a fake, far more than X-rays,



By courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
This beautiful Greek bronze of the 5th century B.C. was once consigned to the basement of the Metropolitan Museum as a fake

infra-red or any other form of natural analysis, they are by no means infallible. A bust of a woman emerging from a flower, known as the Townley Flora, was among the most famous pieces in the British Museum. Is it conceivable that this absurdly Victorian object should be genuinely antique? Not only conceivable, but true: it has an impeccable pedigree. On the other hand, the Etruscan sarcophagus which used to be one of the objects in the Museum most admired by artists and aesthetes, was made by two Italian brothers named Pinelli, one of whom confessed to spite the other. Which suggests that when a style of the past has a special appeal to our appetites we swallow forgeries with the rest.

The concept of forgery in the arts is a part of our Western European notion that the arts must continually change and develop. It reflects the creative restlessness of Western man. But if you believe that art reached perfection at some remote epoch, and that the best thing one can do is to try to reproduce the style of that epoch, the word forgery does not exist. Two of the great stable civilizations held this

opinion. The amazing achievements of Egypt in the Old Kingdom were such that subsequent dynasties were anxious to imitate its triumphs both in life and in art. The British Museum purchased, for a very large sum, a head which appears to be an admirable sculpture of the fourth dynasty, i.e. 2600 B.C. It was excavated in a tomb dated about 600, and so was carved 2,000 years later than its style would have one believe. No one suggested that the British Museum had bought a forgery and quite rightly. This was simply an example of the unbroken tradition of Egyptian art. Conversely the exquisite small piece known as the Macgregor head is now thought to represent Senurset III, and so be dateable to 1900 B.C.; for a long time it was believed to date from about the year 570 B.C.

How agreeable and salutary to be able to judge old works of art without the art-historical snobbery that persuades us to admire ever earlier epochs of European art. This snobbery still applies to the art of China. When early Chinese art first appeared on the European market, the sacred word was T'ang. I remember how the connoisseurs of the 1920s used to pronounce that word with the same unctuous reverential intonation as the word Bach (with a very long 'a'). There was a certain amount of T'ang pottery (much of it the equivalent of Staffordshire figures), and a little T'ang sculpture. But, as far as anyone knew, practically no T'ang painting. It then occurred to certain intelligent dealers that a great deal of Ming painting was a close imitation of T'ang, and could be sold as such. The earliest and most enterprising of these dealers, called Charles Vignier, managed to sell one such picture to no less an authority than Bernard Berenson, and it had pride of place in his collection just outside his study door. After Vignier's death it was found that he had cut the picture out of a scroll which was dated in the despised Ming dynasty. He had carelessly (or mischievously) omitted to throw the dated fragment away. Mr Berenson's picture was put into a large black wardrobe; but it remained equally beautiful and I believe that it is now back in its original position.

This story illustrates what I might call the

legalist view of the ethics of forgery – that we must distinguish between the work and its intention. As we shall see, the distinction is not always as easy to make as one might expect.

Antiquities were widely forged in the Renaissance. Michelangelo himself, as everyone knows, carved a sleeping Cupid in the Greco-Roman style, and had it buried (as so many of his countrymen have done since) so that it might be exhumed and sold as an antique. He did not do it for money (Michelangelo was never poor) but in order to prove that a living sculptor could do as well as the ancients, and when his piece was duly dug up, admired and sold as an antique, he came forward and claimed it. But before his time Renaissance artists had already begun the dangerous practice of restoring antiques – I say dangerous because no artist can resist bringing an old work of art into line with the style of his own time. Even the Apollo of the Belvedere, which for four hundred years was the most admired work of art in the world, was treated in this way – the inconvenient right arm was chopped off; a new arm, with a more eloquent gesture, put in its place. Perhaps this was a gain but the declamatory extension of the Laocoon's left arm added by Montorsoli was certainly a mistake. In fact, the real one was in the Vatican all the time, but was put back in place only a few years ago. Both these changes were made to satisfy stylistic impulses. But by the eighteenth-century restorations were made purely for gain. I say restorations, but the fragments of original work were often so small that they should really be classed as forgeries made to swindle the travelling collectors. As this restoration was done to make the piece saleable, one can properly class it as forgery. It may be thought that our ancestors were boobies to have accepted the authority of a piece like this. But we do exactly the same when the authority is an eminent archaeologist. Take for example the helmet from Sutton Hoo as it was first reconstructed. It was made of plasticine and tiny pieces of bronze were stuck about on it in what were thought to be probable places; then, after twenty-five years of intensive scholarship, came a second reconstruction by the same archaeologist, still made of plasticine



By courtesy of the National Gallery, London

Portrait of Constanza de' Medici in the style of Domenico Ghirlandaio. 'Personally I have no doubt that it is a fake'

with roughly the same number of little bits of bronze stuck on to it in slightly different places, owing to a change in the current concept of a primitive warrior.

Of course this is not a forgery. It was not done for material gain, but for the advancement of knowledge. But in effect it is not unlike the restored antiques of the eighteenth-century.

Unfortunately when works of art are for sale the restorer's motives are not always as honourable. The gem of Mr Clarence Mackay's collection was a picture attributed by all authorities, including Mr Berenson, to the Florentine painter Alessio Baldovinetti. The painting always looked a bit smooth, and after it had hung in the National Gallery, Washington, for some years, I persuaded the Director to X-ray it. I confess I had always thought it a straight forgery, but I should have known better. For-



By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

The Townley Flora. 'Is it conceivable that this absurdly Victorian object should be genuinely antique?'

gers like to have something to go on, and here the point of departure was a somewhat damaged picture by a second-rate Florentine called Pier Francesco Fiorentino. The restorer – in this case I think one can really use the word forger – had made the heads more attractive to a modern eye – in particular the head of the child, which is based on one in a famous Baldovinetti in the Louvre. It is an extremely advanced piece of restoration.

Only someone who has worked in a great gallery and kept in daily, or hourly, touch with his restorers, knows what marvellous craftsmen they are. For anyone to set up as an authority on old masters who has not worked in a gallery is like someone setting up as a doctor who has not worked in a teaching hospital. The trouble is that so many craftsmen long to be artists. If you leave an eminent restorer alone for a week,



By courtesy of the Trustees of the Wallace Collection

Ivory 'had the greatest charm for the forger'. Purported fifteenth-century mirror case, now accepted as nineteenth-century forgery

there is no knowing what his creative urge may not lead him to do; and you will never discover it. But there is one thing that the restorers *are* reluctant to do, and that is to start from scratch. They copy, or do things in reverse, or build on a few crude outlines. Even an obvious forgery, like the little picture bought by Boston as a Raphael, may be a worked-up picture of the school of Lorenzo Costa, whose style is still visible in the ladies' dress. At this point the reader may well ask how does one know that the Boston Raphael is a forgery? The pretty, modern face immediately puts one on one's guard: most forgeries have agreeable faces according to the ideal of prettiness of the time. Then one becomes aware of the insensitive outline of the cheek and neck, the mechanical drawing of the eyes, the general lack of plasticity, and one compares it in one's mind with Raphael's Madalena Doni. But let me add that this analytical process is only corroborative. Dozens of people who care for Italian painting, when they opened their morning papers and saw a black and white half-tone reproduction of Boston's latest purchase, groaned and said 'Oh dear, they've bought another fake'. (Boston

had acquired a much more discreditable fake, a profile portrait of a lady, some years earlier.)

The earliest 'fakers' were restorers of antiques. But by the middle of the nineteenth century there was a fair collection of fake mediaeval sculptures as well. I am in two minds about the restoration of mediaeval sculpture. As everyone knows, the Protestant reformers of both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries knocked the heads off nearly every piece of mediaeval sculpture in England, and a great many pieces in France. Should these heads be put back? We can test our feelings by visiting in succession the Chapter House at Salisbury and the Lady Chapel at Ely. I must confess that when I first visited Salisbury as a schoolboy I was delighted by the beauty and richness of the sculpture in the Chapter House and it was only a good deal later that I learned that the heads – and often the bodies – were restorations by John Birnie Philip. We know what he did because the architect Cockerell made drawings of them before restoration. The headless figures at Ely make a pitiful impression – and yet what one sees is authentic. The somewhat unethical answer is that much depends on the skill of the restorer. If he is as skilful as the craftsmen who worked for Pugin or Burgess it is really much more agreeable to have a complete impression and to concentrate on the Bible story rather than to go groaning from one headless trunk to another. And yet what pitfalls this opens for us! Even if beauty is not truth (and personally I believe it is), the two qualities are closely allied. And to add a large quantity of untruth to achieve a total effect of beauty is to do, on a more modest but pervasive scale, what Montorsoli did when he restored the Laocoon and gave it a totally un-antique character.

Among the restorers of the Gothic revival were craftsmen of skill and devotion. Pugin describes the difficulty he had in the 1840s of finding and training men who could carry out his ideals. In monumental sculpture he was not always successful, but in small ornamental pieces he produced marvellous results. The Gothic revival restorers in France and Italy were at least equally successful. It is a somewhat disturbing fact that, because they are

painted, no one is quite sure which of the sculptures in the Sainte Chapelle are genuine. Two of them are in the Museum of Cluny, and I suppose they were selected because they looked the most authentic. No one has dared to strip them of their modern paint. What a blow for the art historian if they were nineteenth-century!

This remarkable knowledge of mediaeval art and skill of execution could not be limited to restoration. A lot of it went into imitation, and this inevitably shaded off into forgery. Silver reliquaries were much in demand among Jewish collectors but very few of them had survived and the forger was called in to fill the gap. The material which had the greatest charm for the forger was ivory. The number of forged Gothic ivories is very large; there is a public collection in Madrid almost entirely devoted to them, and there are still a few on exhibition in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Wallace Collection. It is charitable to suppose that some of them were done with honourable intention, as objects of private devotion. In the nineteenth century, when religion became fashionable among the upper classes, smart London shops were called on to furnish their chapels. Until quite recently Messrs Asprey had a religious department.

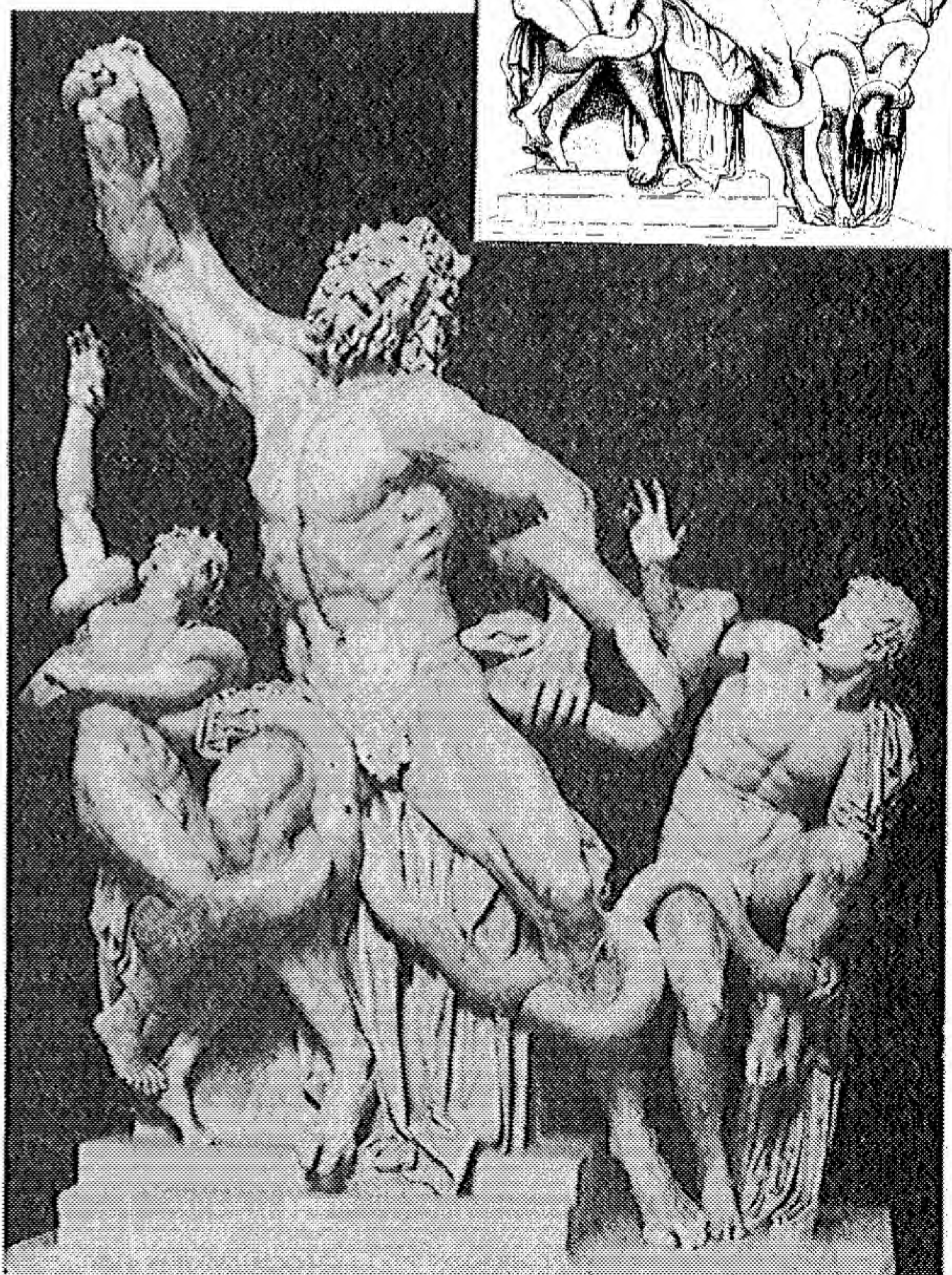
Now is it not somewhat hypocritical to fall into ecstasies before the ivory Virgins in the Sacristy of Notre Dame or the Museum of Villeneuve-les-Avignon, and turn away from works which so closely resemble them? And what would the sculptor have been doing if he had not been so employed? Producing work in 'the style of his own time' that would have pleased nobody, and been long since forgotten.

Why are so many of the best forgeries ivories? Partly a matter of demand and supply. Collectors love ivories, and there were not enough old ones to go round. And partly because it is always easier to imitate an early style on a small scale. The same reasons account for another favourite branch of forgery, Greek terracottas. It used to be said that the prettier they were, the less likely they were to be antique, but this is not quite true, because the first big discovery of terracottas to become famous, that made by the French at Tanagra in

the early nineteenth century, contains the prettiest of the lot, and we should never allow ourselves to believe that anything so seductive was genuine were it not for this unimpeachable provenance. They would seem to provide all that a nineteenth century French collector could desire, but in fact they were far too simple and austere for the taste of the Rothschild family, and a remarkable artist devoted his life to furnishing the many Rothschild collections with Tanagrettes of a tastier variety.

The master of the Rothschild Tanagrettes was an individual artist of considerable charm, whose work will ultimately be identified and sought after. He found in the style of the past an incentive and a model that did not exist in the very confused cultural traditions of the mid-

(Right) The Laocoon before Montorsoli added the declamatory right forearm (below). It has now been 'restored' to its original form

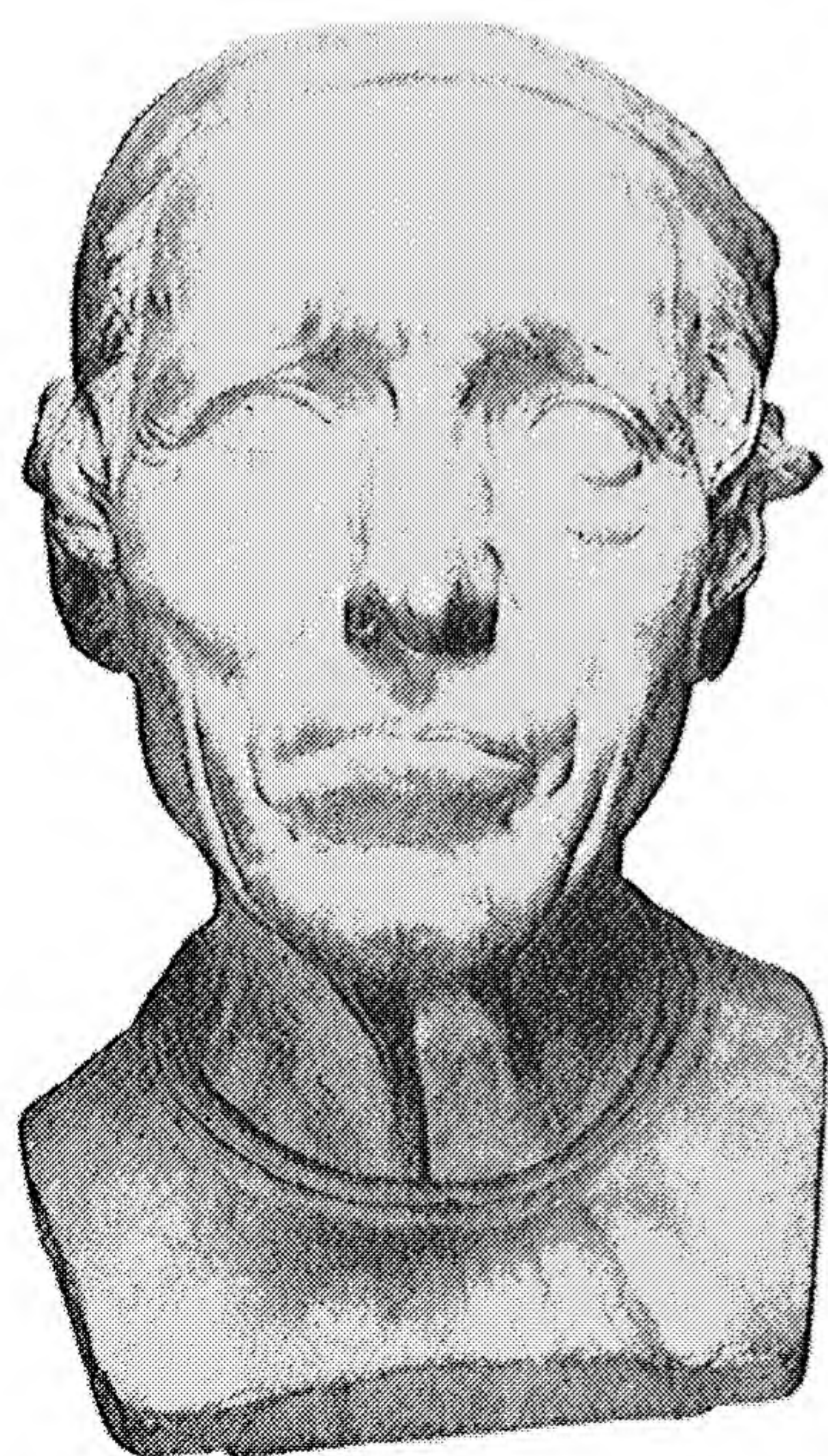


Mansell Collection

nineteenth century. The same is true, on a grander scale, of a man who can be described as the greatest forger who has ever lived, Giovanni Bastianini. He was born in 1830, and early in life made a contract with a Florentine dealer named Fretta to do Madonnas in the style of Mino da Fiesole and Desiderio da Settignano. I suppose he must have known that they would be sold as originals, but this did not worry him, as he was in love with the Florentine renaissance and all he wanted was to work in the quattrocento style. He soon discovered that his true vocation was realistic portraiture, in the style (more or less) of Antonio Rossellino. He did a rather too dramatic bust of Savonarola – fakes often betray themselves by over-emphasis – that became extremely famous, and was universally accepted as an authentic likeness of the

frate, a bust of Marsilio Ficino, rather dry and scratchy, and finally a famous head of Savonarola's friend, Girolamo Benivieni. This latter was modelled direct from a Florentine workman, and when proposed as a purchase for the Louvre was rejected as too realistic. The students of the Beaux-Arts then protested. The authorities of the Louvre, they said, blinded by academic prejudice, could not recognise that the great artists of the Renaissance, like themselves, were aiming at realism. The Benivieni had been rejected, not because of any doubts as to its authenticity, but because of its truth. This was more than Bastianini could stand, and he persuaded Fretta to announce the fact that he, Bastianini, was the author of the Benivieni and of several of the other realistic busts admired by the young and already in the Louvre. The curious fact is that this announcement did not change the current of opinion at all. A number of people thought that Fretta was lying, and he continued to exhibit and sell Bastianini's work

The busts of Savonarola (right) and his friend Benivieni (left) were accepted as contemporary portraits even after Bastianini, 'the nineteenth-century master forger', owned them as his creation. Thereafter Bastianinis were still used as models for art students such as Lord Clark, who drew this head at the age of 14



By courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum

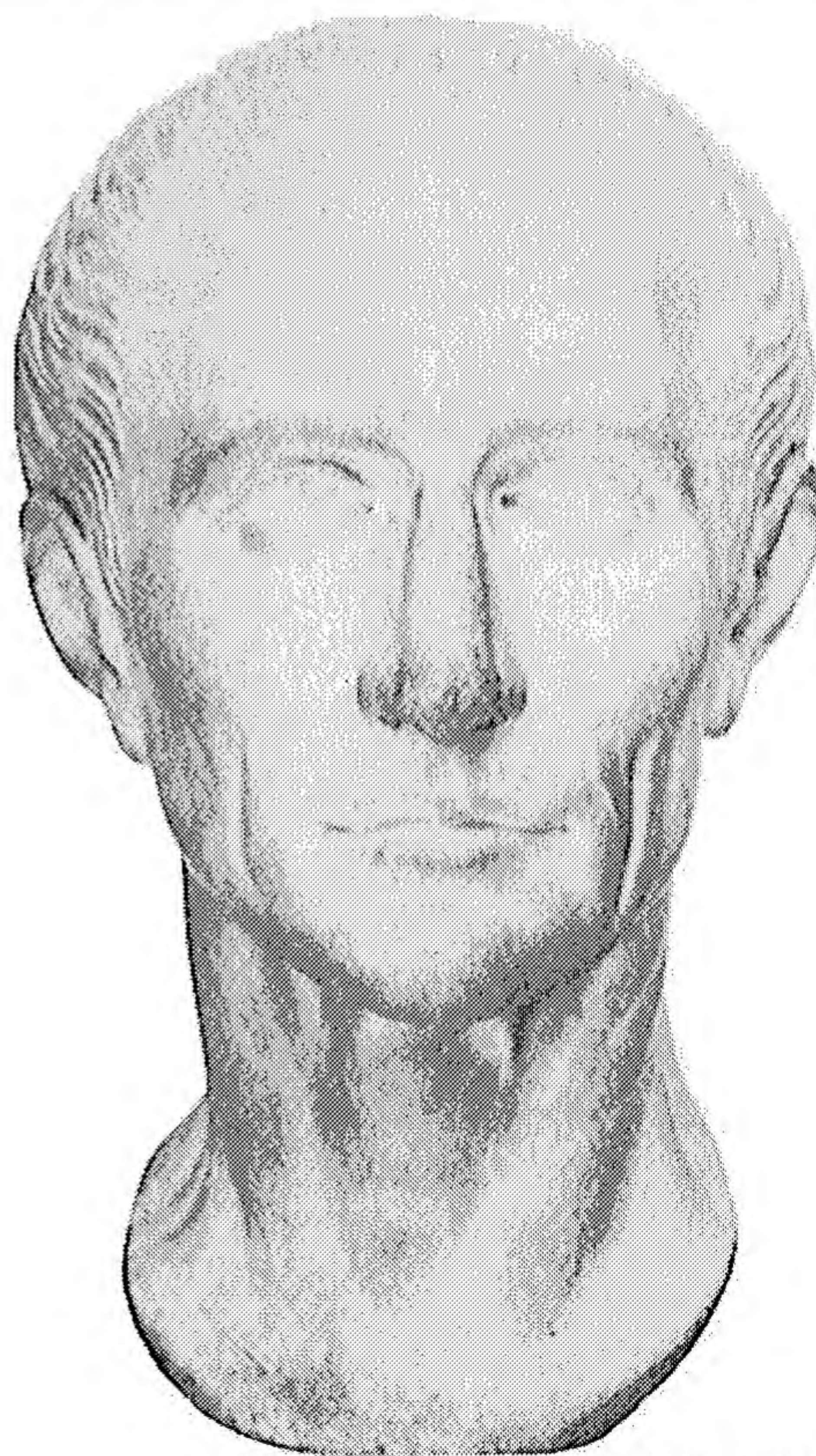
as if it were *quattrocento*. Bastianini even did a palpably modern piece of work called 'La Chanteuse Florentine', which inspired a rapturous letter by Rossini, and was bought by the most illustrious collector of Renaissance art in Paris, M. André. It can still be seen in the Jacquemart André Museum.

From all this one can draw several conclusions. First that with forgeries, as with everything else, if people are set on an idea you can't change them; secondly that in the confused aesthetic values of the 1860s there was a real need for the straightforward realism of the Renaissance; and thirdly that people like best the art of the past when it has been slightly modified to suit the taste of their own time. Of this I can give an illustration from my own experience. I was taught drawing at school in a dismal room that contained about a dozen casts, which I was required to draw in pencil. As I drew them every week for four years I got to know them fairly well. Four of them were by Bastianini, one was the British Museum Caesar, which is an eighteenth-century fake, and one was the bust of a female saint, which is not, I believe, by Bastianini, but is undoubtedly nineteenth-century. There was not a single cast of an authentic work by Mino da Fiesole, Rossellino, still less Donatello, simply because they would all have contained an element of style that would have upset my drawing master. The same, I am sure, was true of art schools all over the country.

Bastianini illustrates one of the chief impulses of forgery: that it supplies confirmation for the historical imagination of its time. Every age recreates the past, and asks of it something that it cannot always provide. An example is the figure of Queen Margaret on the south portal of Lincoln Cathedral. I cannot be the only person who, at an early age, bought a postcard of this charming lady. But it soon dawned on me that she looked suspiciously like a synthesis of mid-Victorian beauties. Why this head alone should have been spared by the reformers was explained by some implausible story of the figure having been covered by a wooden gallery. On close examination one sees that the head was not spared, but was knocked

off at the neck like all the others. The problem is why she alone was given a new head in the nineteenth century. I suppose her graceful drapery seemed to invite the addition of a head that would realize the Victorian dream of ladylike modesty.

The surviving likenesses of Julius Caesar are disappointing – only a few coins and a head in the Museo Baracco, which make him look rather scraggy and insignificant. So in the late eighteenth century some unknown sculptor fulfilled the need for a more impressive image. For over a century this head added considerably to our estimation of the great man. It was to be found in the entrance halls of headmasters' houses all over Britain. Then, owing to shortage of staff, headmasters' houses contracted; and perhaps one should say that their ideal of a good man expanded. So a smaller image was produced for them, a statuette of Socrates, which is to be found on hundreds of schoolmas-



By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum
Often accepted as a genuine portrait of Julius Caesar, this sculpture is in fact a late eighteenth-century work



By courtesy of the Courtauld Institute of Art

Queen Margaret, on the south portal of Lincoln Cathedral, had long been believed to have escaped 'execution' by the Puritans

ters' mantelpieces. This charming work was acquired by the British Museum almost a hundred years after the Caesar, and I suppose was made at the beginning of this century. It is considerably better than the small busts of composers which used to be found on the shelves of music-lovers, and I think that everyone would be sorry if it were to be withdrawn. I should add that the staff of the British Museum believe it to be authentic.

There was (as far as I know) no Bastianini of painting, and the only forger to leave a name was an impudent rascal named Ioni. He wrote a Cellinesque autobiography entitled *The Affairs of a Painter*, in which he hit on the bright idea of reproducing a number of his own forgeries signed. He painted them specially for the book, and made them so bad that they would not have

deceived anyone. This lulled Museum directors and collectors into thinking that they knew what an Ioni was like; but they didn't, and a number of his paintings are still exhibited in public galleries. Although not a modest man, Ioni was conscious of a modest talent and confined himself to provincial schools, in particular to Sienese and Umbrian painters of the *quattrocento*, then just coming into fashion. A few of Ioni's works are in Mr Berenson's collection, although whether he bought them as originals or as warning examples is not at all clear.

Like many forgers, Ioni was motivated less by greed than by a natural naughtiness. He enjoyed the fun of fooling the experts and museum directors, and would go to any lengths to achieve it. Mrs Berenson described to me how he made them take a long journey in a *carozza* to a small fifteenth-century church in a remote part of the Siena countryside to see a picture he remembered seeing many years previously. 'This time, my friends, it is genuine. *Lo giuro sulla testa del mio figlio**.' The church was overgrown, the door was locked, the sacristan could not be found, and when discovered had lost the key – all the usual things. When at last they got in, there over the Altar was an Ioni. All they said was 'Ioni, you old scoundrel, you'll pay for the *carozza*'.

Only the Italians can forge with this elaborate devotion to mischief, and perhaps for this reason their forgeries are more easily recognized than those of their Dutch and Flemish colleagues. There was no lighthearted mischief about Van Meegeren, only an obsessive desire to be revenged on the official art-world and the critics who had not recognized him as a painter. In fact he was a repulsive painter, but under the influence of his obsession and, one must admit, his admiration for Vermeer, he produced a solemn and sentimental picture, which has a haunting quality. Why anyone ever supposed it to be by Vermeer is a mystery; but the leading expert of the time named Bredius was looking for just such a picture, that would link the early religious pictures of Vermeer with his mature work. It was a feeble link, but Bredius was delighted. His theory of Vermeer's develop-

*This will be a test of my good-faith.

ment was justified. He pronounced, the rest followed. I think of it every time I go to a doctor. Van Meegeren had his revenge, but it was short lived, because after this supreme effort he lost confidence and produced some of the most painfully ugly and obvious forgeries that have ever been made.

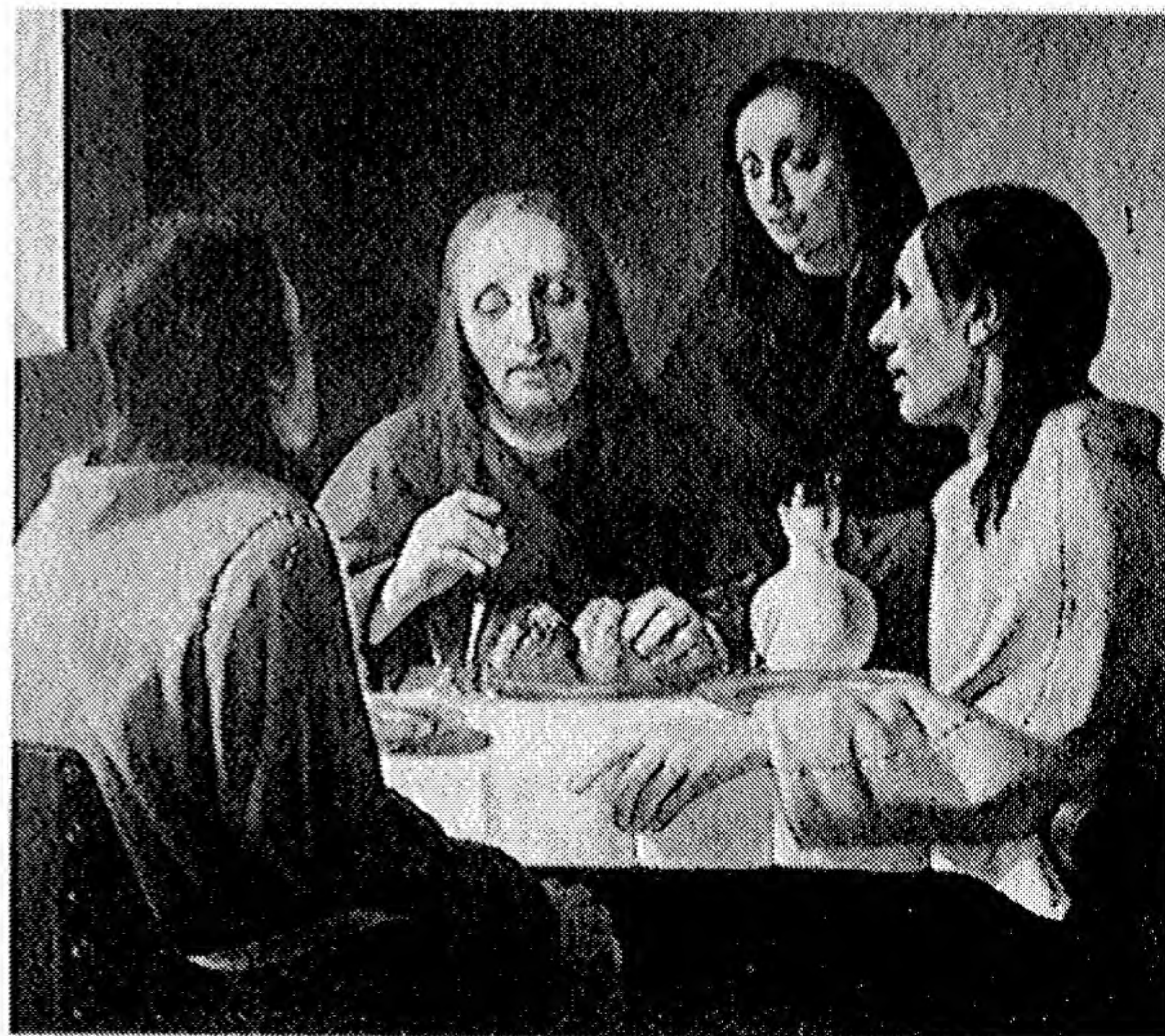
One of the reasons why forgeries are not more often exposed is that busy people can't be bothered with the press publicity that would be involved. We all know dozens of forgeries, but what does it matter – and what a nuisance to get into a controversy. Thousands of people could see that the Van Meegeren was a fake – almost everybody was sure that the Boston Raphael was a fake. But to say so would have caused a lot of fuss. Why complicate one's life? Nearly all forgeries have been exposed by the forger himself, out of pride; or by his partner, as the result of a quarrel, and even then, as we saw from Bastianini, people continue to believe in them.

There is a whole group of forgeries which came into existence because they were in a style that looked easy to imitate. This is particularly true of modern painting, to which neither the technical criteria nor the tests of representation can be applied. A friend of mine who used to live in Chicago had two very fine and large cubist paintings by Braque and Picasso and a Matisse, which she hung in her sitting-room. Her visitors naturally fell into raptures before such valuable works. My friend was exasperated, and herself painted two Braques and a Picasso which she hung in her dining-room in equally expensive frames. They were admired, even preferred to the ones in the sitting-room. I think I might just have told the difference, but when I last visited her in New York she had done a free version of Picasso's portrait of Kahnweiler (she had given the original to the Art Institute on leaving Chicago) that I swear no one could have told was not a Picasso: it actually hung next to a genuine Picasso, so one had a term of reference. Well, if a talented amateur can do this to evolved works by Braque and Picasso, what cannot a professional do with a Miro or a Mondrian. I do not envy the expert of the future – if indeed people are still foolish enough to call one in and not be content to enjoy

a picture that they presumably bought to give them pleasure.

I have not been unduly severe on forgers of works of art. The financial aspect seems to me of no importance. Anyone who buys a work of art as an investment deserves what he gets. In fact forgers have never made much money – just the steady income of the honest craftsman. For a dealer to sell a rich man a fake is ethically less reprehensible than for a stockbroker to sell a poor man a dud share, which happens, without comment, every day. Collectors derive much satisfaction from their fakes. Moreover the art of forgery enables certain artists who want to work in a traditional style that would be rejected by fashionable critics, to earn a living. I wish that it were possible for more young painters to take to forgery. They would provide for old-fashioned collectors a number of charming works which it would be hypocrisy not to admire.

However, when all is said, I am against forgeries. Many of them are as ugly and sordid as criminals, others are painfully sentimental, and illustrate the evasions that we have developed in order to escape from the brutality of the post-industrial world. And if I am accused of turning an aesthetic argument into an ethical one, I am unrepentant because I think that the two are indissolubly connected.



By courtesy of the Boyamns-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam
'The Last Supper at Emmaus' – the fake 'Vermeer' by van Meegeren, the most notorious of twentieth-century art forgers